

LEARNING – THE FOUNDATION FOR AGILITY AND SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE

“The ability for organisations – and the people who work in them – to learn fast, adapt and manage change, has never been more important for organisational survival. Learning is a key strategic lever that organisations can use to maintain a leading market position. Learning should be high up the business agenda, but too often, learning professionals lack credibility and influence as business leaders. The Learning function needs to build its influence as an agent of change and performance improvement, leading the agenda in terms of how learning can enable organisation growth.”

Gillian Pillans, Report Author

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“A NEW TYPE OF THINKING IS ESSENTIAL IF MANKIND IS TO SURVIVE AND MOVE TOWARDS HIGHER LEVELS.”

Albert Einstein

- 1 We live in an age of ‘Digital Darwinism’, where business models can be disrupted at a stroke and once-successful organisations can go out of business almost overnight. Success in today’s world requires organisations to be agile: to make timely, effective and sustained changes to stay ahead of the competition in a fast-changing business context. The ability - for both organisations and the people who work in them - to learn fast, innovate and adapt has never been more important. Learning is a critical strategic lever that organisations can deploy to build and sustain a market-leading position. Learning can be a source of competitive advantage and should be high on the business agenda.
- 2 The Learning function should be taking a leading role in supporting organisation growth and building the capacity for innovation, change and performance improvement. Yet we find that the Learning profession is often under-powered, tucked away within HR, lacking business credibility, insufficiently focused on building the capabilities required for business growth, and struggling to demonstrate the business impact of its activities.
- 3 The way learning is delivered is fundamentally changing. Key trends discussed in this report include:
 - Learning is moving out of the classroom and online. The increased use of technology is offering the prospect of making learning more directly relevant to people’s jobs, decreasing the ‘transfer gap’ between learning and performance, and making learning resources available wherever and whenever needed.
 - Learning is becoming increasingly democratised and personalised. Learning content is being made available to an ever-wider audience who can choose how they navigate their way through the resources available.
 - The role of the Learning function is shifting: it’s increasingly about ‘curating’ content from both within and outside the organisation, and deploying technology to enable individual learners to take control of what, how and where they learn.

While these developments have many implications for the role and capabilities required of the Learning function, we need to be careful not to lose sight of the fundamental role of learning, which remains the same: the purpose of learning should be to enable delivery of the business strategy. New technologies and delivery methods are only useful to the extent that they enable learning to fulfil this core purpose.
- 4 If the Learning function is to remain business-relevant in a highly complex, fast-changing business context, the challenge is five-fold.
 - a. Learning has to focus on developing the critical capabilities needed to execute the business strategy. Learning should be targeted in areas that enhance the organisation’s competitive advantage. Delivering a generic curriculum of online courses is not good enough. The Learning strategy has to be clearly defined, aligned to the corporate strategy, and differentiated from competitors’. Design and evaluation of learning needs to begin with the question: what business problems are we trying to solve? The Learning function cannot act in isolation: there has to be governance and processes that support ongoing dialogue with key business stakeholders to determine priorities and whether learning is delivering the desired results.
 - b. Learning has to play a key role in supporting growth and innovation. We contrast ‘generative’ and ‘productive’ learning and argue that learning has to orient towards enabling generative learning in order to support sustainable business growth. Productive learning (learning about what we

“THE LEARNING FUNCTION SHOULD BE CONCENTRATING ITS ENERGY AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN LEADERSHIP, ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT AND STRATEGIC CHANGE. THIS IS WHERE IT CAN HAVE GREATEST IMPACT ON STRATEGIC BUSINESS OUTCOMES. IT’S A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR THE LEARNING FUNCTION, BUT IT NEEDS TO REVISIT ITS PURPOSE AND CAPABILITIES IF IT’S GOING TO HAVE THE CAPACITY TO MEET THE DEMANDS BEING MADE OF IT BY THE C-SUITE.”

Michael Chavez, Chief Executive Officer, Duke CE

already know with the goal of improving productivity or quality) is necessary for optimum performance in today’s business but is insufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. Generative learning involves creative problem solving and coming up with new possibilities. It is also essentially a collaborative endeavour. Learning techniques such as action learning and experiential learning that are based on co-creation can be deployed to develop and test new strategies and open up new markets.

c. Learning needs to focus on building high-performing organisations – not just improving the performance of individuals. While most learning activity is focused on supporting individuals, greater impact can be achieved by helping teams and organisations improve their collective performance and learn together. We argue that creating a ‘learning organisation’ that’s capable of continuously learning and adapting is one of the most effective responses to the complex environment in which organisations operate. Learning organisations operate as a system, combining ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ in a way that facilitates continuous learning. The ‘hardware’ includes processes for experimenting, learning from experience and

continuously updating operating procedures to maximise efficiency. The ‘software’ describes a culture of psychological safety where people are encouraged to challenge the status quo, and openness to using mistakes or failures as an opportunity for learning rather than something to be avoided or blamed on someone else.

d. As learning moves out of the classroom, the Learning function is having to cede control over who learns what and where. This makes it even more critical that Learning professionals have deep expertise in how adults learn, so they can design highly effective learning products, and help educate learners and their line managers in how to sustain behaviour change. Learning professionals need to be guided by the features of good learning design: making the learning content engaging and relevant to the learner’s job; incorporating reflection and deliberate practice; engaging both rational and emotional parts of the brain; and stimulating the learner’s motivation to learn. It’s also important to make sure that the work context supports application of what’s being learned, and that line managers are engaged to support their teams’ learning.

e. The challenge for Learning professionals is to build the capabilities required to act as credible business partners to support the organisation in achieving its goals. This means having strong business acumen, to understand the organisation’s strategy, markets and future direction, and diagnose business-oriented learning solutions. Learning professionals also need to build skills in organisation development and consulting, so they can develop solutions to help teams and organisations develop and improve their performance. The key challenge for the Learning function is to be ahead of the game in terms of understanding where the organisation is heading, and to define and communicate how learning can help the organisation and its people achieve their objectives.

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